

6. The long struggle

A secret ballot conducted by the High Commission team did declare the wish of the majority of Banabans to reside on Rabi and keep it as their headquarters and home. This was a reality decision. Although none of them had returned to Banaba to see it for themselves since the war, the resumption of large scale mining on Banaba offered little practical prospect of the Banabans returning there in numbers. Hundreds of Gilbertese had been hired after the war to rework Banaba, and not one of the ‘troublesome’ Banabans was ever asked to go.

In 1947 the further leasing of a further 671 acres to BPC – virtually everything left on Banaba – was agreed to for another 30 years. The officially appointed Banaban Adviser (paid by the Banabans themselves) was contacted by the British High Commissioner just prior to these negotiations...”on no account should you be involved in these negotiations.” In the legal action that followed 30 years later in London, High Court Judge Sir Robert Megarry would describe this last major transaction as a major disaster for the Banabans. “It defies all comprehension that they were denied legal advice at this time,” the judge concluded.

The resumption of phosphate mining on Ocean Island allowed the system of royalty payments in the form of bonuses and annuities to continue. These were further boosted in 1965 by higher rates of payments from BPC. Unfortunately, these higher payments gave the Banabans little incentive to build up their resources and self sufficiency. In just a few generations they literally had become a nation of tin-openers.

With the approach of the exhaustion of profitable mining on Banaba, prospects did not look good and the Banabans

became increasingly aware of the predicament they faced. They began to claim out loud to the world that they had not been properly advised. In particular they claimed how they had been misled as to the amount of royalties that was being paid out from Banaban phosphate to the Gilbert and Ellice Islands colonial government.

Unbeknown to them earlier, fully 85 percent of the actual amount of royalties had been going straight to the Gilbert and Ellice Colony coffers to subsidize services in other islands, islands that the Banabans never considered themselves part of. They also found their phosphate had been sold to Australia and New Zealand farmers at below the price of equivalent phosphate from competitive sources. The loss to them in reduced royalties was quantified in 1968 at about A\$46 million.

During the late 1960s, the Banabans became inspired by the case of Nauru in the international arena, particularly the lobbying by 'Hammer' de Roburt and the 'Geelong Boys', a group of feisty Nauruans trapped in Australia during the war who received education in the legal ways of the 'white man'. Thanks to their leadership, the Nauruans negotiated a settlement of over A\$100m in total.

7. Claims for compensation and independence

In 1966, a Banaban Methodist minister named Tebuke Rotan journeyed to London on behalf of the Banaban people to demand reparations from the British to laying waste to their island. The claim would take almost 20 years and become the longest running case in British legal history. After some 50 visits to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, he was first offered (and rejected) 80,000 pounds compensation.

In 1971, the Banabans sued for damages in the High Court, A\$21 million from BPC and unspecified damages from the British Government.

During this time, around 100 young Banaban men and women from Rabi sailed to re-colonize Banaba. Here they were met with strong opposition from a Gilbertese police force under control from Tarawa. After days of standoffs and minor clashes, the police united with Gilbertese mine workers to arrest all the Banabans, firing tear gas and using batons against them. These skirmishes resulted in one of the young Banabans, Tabere Biara, being struck on the head by a tear gas canister. He became paralyzed and died a few months later. The Rabi Council of Leaders called off all further protest action. Later another group would return, and were treated like refugees on their own island.

After lengthy litigation back in Britain, the court ruled the British Government was guilty of moral negligence but not liable in the strict legal sense, leaving it in effect for the British Government to offer compensation. In 1977 the British Government offered the Banabans an *ex gratia* payment of

A\$10 million on the condition they drop all further legal action.

After four years of consideration, the Banabans finally accepted the A\$10 million compensation package, plus interest, in 1981. To this day they still only have access to the interest from the A\$10 million Banaban Trust Fund. It barely pays the wages of public works employees on Rabi and Banaba today.

The loss of mining annuities after cessation of mining in 1979 was a bitter financial blow to the Banabans. They still had their Trust Fund, but considering the loss of their homeland, it is pitiful especially by Nauru standards.

The question of independence was formally raised in January 1974 when the Banabans submitted a petition to the British Government calling for separation of Ocean Island (Banaba) from the then Gilbert and Ellice Colony. This Banaban petition was referred to the Governor of the Colony, who duly consulted the newly formed Council of Ministers which was set up in May 1974 following the introduction of a new constitution in the Colony. The Council replied that they would oppose separation and independence for Ocean Island either then or in the future.

This is still the staunch view of the Kiribati government, who recently set up a local council on Banaba as part of new local government initiatives. This move has quietly irked many Banabans who see it as an interference into what they regard as their own affairs of governance.

The Banabans freehold tenure of Rabi may be secure under the Banaban Settlement Act, but many Banabans feel that after repeated political upheavals in Fiji, their existence in their new country is not as secure as they were first lead to believe.

Rather toady, many feel they are “subject to the mercy or whim of ethnic Fijians.”

Rabi’s history is tumultuous. Tongan mercenaries in 1855 conquered Fijian rebels on Rabi at the request of Tui Cakau of nearby Tavenui. This chief later sold Rabi to the Europeans to cover outstanding debts. Grumbings about the legality of that deal still emanate from Taveuni landowners. This is also the case with fishing rights around the waters of Rabi, several instances relayed to me of indigenous Fijians strongly protesting to Banabans engaged in fishing activities. Matters of principle rather than law.

It is beyond the scope of this report to detail all these issues, but it is wise to be aware of the issues and feelings that exist amongst the Banaban people today.



Tabwewa fishermen return from the reef

8. The last decade.

By late 1991, many Banabans on Rabi had become terribly disillusioned with the performance of their Council of Leaders, several of whom abused office and misused council funds for everything from alcohol to expensive business-class overseas travel. Wages for employees had not been paid, transport and water services were drying up and frustrations resulted in a mini-coup that saw the near-violent overthrow of the Council.

The installation of an Interim Administration bitterly divided the Rabi community, but resulted in much soul-searching amongst the Banabans. Many felt the community had lost its way, that all these troubles had only happened because they were not staying true to their culture. One of the first steps the Interim Administration took was to close the local liquor store, which sold hard liquor in large quantities.

Marvelous incentives were encouraged during this time, the Youth Movement and Women's Interest Groups are but two examples. But overall life for the inhabitants of Rabi stayed rudimentary. Many still live in makeshift housing, their possessions kept still in the suitcases of their arrival. Many families face economic hardship, the population of Rabi by comparison the poorest people in Fiji.

It is certainly not getting any better for them. Dramatically falling interest returns, especially since the dramatic events of Sept 11, have left the Banaban people in a vulnerable position, exacerbated also by their past failure to 'plough-back' some of the interest during better times back into their capital fund.

Because this Fund is currently deposited in very safe 'blue chip' investments (namely term deposits at Lloyds Bank, and similar institutions in Paris and Sweden), the interest that the A\$10m is expected to generate this year, used for running both Rabi and Banaba, is expected to be little more than F\$360,000 – well down from a high of \$F1m around ten years ago. Banabans these days have good reason to be genuinely puzzled by the vagaries of world markets!

By continually spending the bulk of their income on community projects, successive Rabi Councils have endeavoured to keep the community together with an emphasis on maintaining ethnic and cultural identity.

Relying on their own strengths and much of it at their own costs, some progress has been made. A road, airstrip, houses, basic school facilities built and water supply systems have all been installed; a local government and administrative system has been established, providing various services to the community.

Much still has to happen, but the reality is that without outside help, the task of improving infrastructure and services and encouraging sustainable employment just cannot be done.

9. The community today

Of the 1003 that arrived on Rabi in 1945, some 300 of these were Gilbertese (now called I-Kiribati) plus a handful of Tuvaluans. As most of these were associated by marriage to a Banaban, they were considered fully part of the community, the rule still applying today that you can only count yourself a Banaban if you have at least one Banaban parent. This deems around 90 percent of Rabi's population to be Banaban, the rest being Fijian, Indian, and pure I-Kiribati who visit or work on a temporary basis.

Only a Banaban can hold full rights on Rabi, able to stand as a candidate and vote in for the election of the governing body: the Rabi Council of Leaders. Also, only a Banaban is entitled to a share of communal income, the benefit of certain services on Rabi, and claim their share of Rabi land, usually around two acres.



Youth headquarters. The only two posters inside warn of AIDS and the giant African snail. Everything on Rabi is basic

Since 1945, the Banaban population has grown strongly, almost seven percent per year, to its current population of 4,041. According to Fiji Registry Dept figures at the time of writing, this overall number includes 1,141 living outside Rabi, mainly congregated in Suva and Labasa, but also the 290 approx that have gone back to live on Banaba.

Rabi has four villages, each named after the original ones on Banaba that existed before the mining. They all lie along the southwest coast, connected by a 20km strip of mostly all-weather-access road. Current population figures for each village are:

Tabwewa	1,173
Uma	666
Tabiang	463
Buakonikai	595

Total	2,897

Although every Banaban on Rabi is enumerated as an inhabitant of one of these four villages, the village populations are not altogether permanent. There is some movement of families to the smaller outlying copra settlements, numbering around ten, on the northern and eastern side of the island. As copra is still an important source of income for many households, it is common for the adult men of a household to spend periods in these outlying settlements.

According to Dr Hans Dagmar, who completed the last major anthropological study of the Banaban community on Rabi in 1985, the second reason for mobility is lack of housing. People are cramped together, the average household size on Rabi is just over eight persons, with newly married couples tending to move in with the wife's parents. The household is

referred to as *te utu*, the same term applying to the wider network of a person's relatives. The Banabans maintain a bilateral kinship structure in which the ties with the relatives of the mother's side are equally important as those on the father's side. A person can thus inherit land both from his/her mother and his/her father. Although there is a clear preference amongst young Banabans to set up their own household, the role of *te utu* remains socially pervasive with strong morality expected. Large family gatherings accompany "rites of passage" such as weddings, funerals, 1st birthdays and other ceremonies including that marking the arrival of girls' puberty.

Next to *te utu* the church is the most pervasive social influence on Rabi. A large part of many people's lives revolves around the churches which are second to none when it comes to motivating and organizing people to undertake communal activities beyond the confines of one's own family. A remarkable amount of time, money and energy is put into church activities. As Dagmar pointed out in his 1985 report, "anyone wanting to see the capacity of Banabans, to draw together in common action for chosen purpose should study the church organisation."

Methodists and Catholics make up the bulk of the Rabi population. Also represented in varying degrees are Mormons, Seven Day Adventists, Pentecostals, Assembly of God, Bahai and more lately a handful of Muslims. Some of these newer arrivals have sparked a strong response from the more traditional denomination churches.



Another boat load of imported food arrives

It is of great concern Rabi does not have a hospital, only a central health centre, especially as this community have many health concerns. The last major health survey revealed significantly higher than normal rate of stillborn, pre and post natal problems, and mortality rates amongst infants. This explains why 1st birthday celebrations are such a milestone for families here. Around 37 percent of adults still smoke (11.3 cigarettes average per day) and compared to closest Fijian villages, diabetes is rampant, with hypertension and lack of exercise the norm. The diet of Rabi people is still nutritionally very unbalanced, due in part to higher food prices. Health education is a priority; more just simply needs to happen.

10. Rabi Council of Leaders

The Banabans in Fiji are citizens of that country and subject to Fiji laws. However, their special ethnic status in Fiji is recognized by the Banaban Settlement Act (Chapter 123, Legislation of Fiji) which established the Rabi Council of Leaders (RCL).

The Council consists of nine democratically elected members, two from each of the four villages and one secretary elected by the entire island. RCL powers are regulated by the relatively unspecific Banaban Settlement Act which, for all intents and purposes, gives RCL a huge degree of autonomy. This concept is very important to the Banabans who are strongly aware of their ethnic identity and set great importance of deciding their own internal affairs. Any encouragement given to these people should take into account the fact that the RCL occupies a very central place in their community.

On one hand this attitude has created a strong dependence of individuals and households on the RCL. For instance, individuals on Rabi regularly approach it for money to fund new ventures. The other side to this dependence issue is that a succession of well-intentioned Councils has encouraged a strength of basic confidence and allegiance.

This caring attitude has set a good tone. Hence Rabi has good potential for community-style development programs to be put in place.

RCL not only runs daily affairs on Rabi but mediates between Rabi and the outside world, aided by its administrative division at Nuku and office in Suva. It has actively supported successful marketing ventures, like a direct free trade agreement with Kiribati for sale of Rabi Kava, but basically

the RCL is now a cash strapped operation. All it's employees recently took a 25 percent pay cut. Only four get more than F\$6,000 salaries. Councilors can expect only a modest annuity. Any past excesses are well realized, the Banaban Trust Fund more secure than ever.

In addition to the F\$360,000 expected to be generated this year from their A\$10m Trust Fund, the operating budget for RCL this year will be just on F\$500,000 with add-ons of Fiji Government grants, income from Suva building rents (Banaba House) and various business charges. Definitely not a lot when you are expected to run two islands, Rabi and Banaba, over 3,000 people and 2,400km apart. RCL also maintains public work jobs amongst the 300 Banabans resettled on Banaba at a cost of around F\$14,000 per month.

Much like in Fiji, special provisions are made for the Banabans in the Constitution of Kiribati, their special chapter ensuring Banabans retain free access to, and legal ownership of, Ocean Island, even though they hold Fijian passports these days.

11. Fishing and Farming

Banabans traditionally are fishermen, their keenness for this task barely diminished. Fish remains their staple diet and main source of protein. Most households still participate in fishing at least once a week, often twice.

Previous Councils have always pushed the concept of commercial fishing ventures, but economic realities have caused this Council to run its Rabi Fish company as a joint-venture with a Chinese fishing company these days, operating out of Suva. This effectively utilizes their deep water license with little capital outlay.

Although the Banabans came with highly developed fishing traditions, they have only acquired subsistence farming skills in the last 57 years since their arrival on Rabi. Breadfruit trees are abundant and Fijian staples such as banana, cassava, kumala, dalo, yam and bele are now widely cultivated and consumed. A species of swamp taro (babai) from Kiribati has also been lately introduced. Despite this, some households still have no food gardens and are vulnerable to unbalanced diets. Poor nutrition is still a major concern here, with diabetes' rate the highest in Fiji.

Rabi still produces around 100 tonnes of copra a year. At current prices this brings in earnings around F\$30,000, but most of the 1,000ha of standing coconuts are old and produce an ever declining crop. Many households depend on copra for basic income and replanting of trees is well overdue.

Much of the plantations or 'coconut lands' have already been subdivided into one acre blocks which have been allocated to individual households for subsistence purposes on the basis of

one acre per family member. Sections of 1/4 acre are also still allocated for residential purposes, while gardening plots (each 2 acres of bush land) are still being allocated in rising hinterland.



Namanoku Benson, Lands Dept surveyor, Rabi, showing records of subsistence plots

The Youth Program was set up on Rabi in 1992 to assist unemployed youth. It's first step was to allocate farming lands on all the rolling highlands behind the four villages to individual youths involved in the program, along with supplying them basic farming tools, seeds and horticultural advice. Although a diverse range of crops were advocated at this time – everything from sago to vanilla beans, tapioca to other assorted vegetables – a shift of emphasis in recent years has seen a tremendous amount of kava planted.

They sell their dried crop to half a dozen middlemen agents on the island, and estimates put the amount sold annually at around three tonnes or F\$0.6m per year.

As mentioned, the RCL has of late been developing a direct trade link with Kiribati for the export of kava and other export commodities including root crops to Tarawa. 'Rabi Kava' has it's retail shop in Suva and is currently involved in exporting around F\$20,000 worth to Kiribati monthly. Kava from Rabi has a well deserved reputation for cleanness and good effect! The demise of the international kava market after liver-damage warnings were issued from USA and Australia has served to show Rabi farmers how vulnerable their market position was.

It is worth an aside here to comment on the conspicuous consumption of kava, 'grog', on Rabi these days, both amongst men and women, this strong Fijian social habit now well adopted by the Banabans! It is not too uncommon for an individual to consume a couple of gallons of 'grog' over a day long sitting. A few refer to it as the new social problem, excessive consumption a symptom of boredom maybe?

The pounding of kava goes on all day and night, the metallic ring of the pounder as it is lifted and tapped against steel bowl ringing through all villages. On Sunday this pounding has now been banned for much of the day so church bells can ring out uninterrupted.

Commercial crops of dalo (tausala variety) are increasing as farmers see potential for profit, last year this root crop earned growers around F\$20,000 last year.



Bauro Kabure of the Banaban Trust Board outside Rabi Kava in Suva

Much agricultural advice has already been dispensed on Rabi, with all reports easily available. During the late 1980s, a cocoa project was initiated on around 100ha of cut over bush on the barely populated eastern side. This was not a unique venture, similar projects established at the same time all around Fiji as joint ventures with the government. The aim of the project was to generate modest economic activity and encourage more people to participate in commercial agriculture. That initiative saw the establishment of an agricultural station/training centre at Nasau, but the project largely wound down when nationwide funding for cocoa projects was terminated. The cutting of 6km of access road from Buakonikai to Nasau remains unfinished because of this also, and today less than 40ha of the original cocoa plantings remains, only marginally productive. Vanilla was also tried with some 1,000 vines established, but poor follow-up by officials, along with decidedly poor marketing arrangements, killed the enthusiasm of growers.

Forestry has good potential on Rabi with 150,000 m³ of timber of various species surveyed in the 1980s. Some logging has occurred behind Daku and Nasau, and there has been

considerable bush clearing for gardening. One positive action on sustainability taken by the Council is a prohibition on clearing forested areas in water catchment areas and on the more steeper, unstable land. These constitute around 5,000ha of Rabi's total area of 6876ha.

The people of Rabi are constantly reminded of this instability. Earlier this year, a section of steep hillside behind Buakonikai slipped straight through two houses, burying 4 sleeping siblings in one house and two adults in another. All died.

Rabi islanders generally import all their construction timber, including those used for boat or canoe making. Many savings could be made if these basic building materials could be produced on the island.

Various feasibility studies on establishing fishing, farming and forestry/sawmilling ventures have been conducted over the years, mostly in the mid '80s. These studies are all still relevant.

12. Compensation and re-mining issues today

It goes without saying the Banaban people are not happy with the deal dished out to them over the 20th century. Compared to the compensation awarded to Christmas Island and Nauru for phosphate mining degradation to the tune of some A\$100m each, the Banaban settlement of A\$10m is certainly a paltry amount, especially considering the economic benefit gained by Australia and New Zealand in particular.

Although the Banaban settlement came with the condition that no further claims be entered into, there has been much talk lately of putting a further case for compensation to the English Privy Council or International Court of Justice in The Hague. In terms of natural justice, the Banabans have a good case, some 85 percent of their royalties were siphoned off without their knowledge to fund public works and administration in the Gilbert and Ellice Group. Not only that, the Banabans were actively denied legal representation along the way.

As a legal entity, the BPC was immediately wound up soon after it's last shipment of phosphate from Banaba in 1979, presumably because of anticipated legal action, so any claims today would effectively have to be made against the existing governments of Britain, Australia and New Zealand.

In terms of benefit to these countries, around 17,652,000 tonnes was removed from Ocean Island during BPC's reign covering 1920 through to 1979. Some 66 per cent of all Banaba phosphate got sprinkled on Australia, 28 percent went to New Zealand farmers, with most of the remainder going to the UK.

Ironic as it may seem today, more than a few Banabans on Rabi are keen to extract the last remaining phosphate from the unmined 60ha portion left of Banaba. This is estimated to be worth at least A\$45m at current prices. The rationale for this argument is that half the profit from mining this remainder could be used to advance the Banaban population both on Banaba and Rabi, while the other half could be used to rehabilitate Banaba by way of blasting, leveling and replanting.

It is not within the scope of this report to detail these options, but again it worth being at least aware of them.

13. Ways forward

To put it bluntly, the Banabans today need as much mental encouragement as they need material initiatives. The experiences of the past century have left them feeling demoralized and abandoned by the world at large. Building up their sense of pride and self worth will form the basis to their motivation and realizing their potential in a modern world.

The BPC fostered a handout mentality that is still evident today. The challenge for any developmental assistance will be to encourage long term financial independence. The idea of receiving money alone does not motivate them like it does many people in the western world – to them, money comes and money goes, you spend it and then go back to a subsistent life. They have lived so long with little, many know nothing else.

The Banabans are motivated by more intrinsic values, seeing their children get a good education or building a church with their bare hands as a service and duty to God.

The examination of these feelings will provide the key to successfully helping the Banabans, looking outside the square for something that will inspire them, tapping into areas of expertise and energy they excel in. Banaban pride is strong, just like their hold on their homeland: tough, resilient and everlasting. They are an unrealized force unto themselves.

The vision of the current RCL is simple and noble, indeed one that should guide any assistance. It reads: “To make Rabi a place where people can enjoy a good standard of living earned through hard work and self-reliance.”

The needs of this community are basic. Ask any Banaban what needs to happen on Rabi and they will unanimously say

‘Development!’ Firstly must come improvements of infrastructure and secondly must come a fundamental reorganization of their means of existence. Both aspects are related, indeed supportive infrastructure improvements like new interior roads to growing plots, full electrification using eco-efficient generating systems, or a new roll-on roll-off jetty would all go towards strengthening Rabi’s economic potential.

Over the next three years, the current RCL will be continuing every previous Council’s ongoing uphill battle in seeking Fiji government assistance to upgrade the road, provide a jetty, reopen the grass strip airport, provide clean water, expand telecommunications (Rabi has only three phone lines to the outside world), beacon reefs. All these things may happen in time of course without assistance, but rest assured it will all be done in ‘Fiji time’.

Add to all this the need to improve basic health-care facilities, devolve themselves of the existing bus service, plus give ongoing encouragement to farmers, fishermen, women’s groups and schools. Council’s interest is understandably stretched to the limit, all hands tied because of lack of funds.



A few retail shops have opened for business on Rabi, selling sacks of rice and other imported food mostly in cans.

The outside world should not forget that the mood of Fiji these days is very much 'Fiji for the Fijians'. The Fijian Banabans are positively discriminated against in much the same way as Fijian Indians are. Fewer school scholarships are made available, national banking credit and business encouragement are all restricted.

Assistance is required. And Rabi is full of people with great ideas waiting for a business kick-start. This could be accomplished by either community development schemes or even fostering a Skills of Enterprise program, similar to those run in New Zealand through community Workcentres, but tailor-made to take into account the cultural and economic considerations of Rabi.

This latter program could ideally capitalize on the energy of a carefully selected group of entrepreneurs to encourage employment at a village level. The Body Shop recognised this potential for Rabi when they brought to Australia six Banaban youths, in lots of two, to attend their Enterprise Development for Indigenous Young People conducted in 1995-7. It was no-doubt a wonderful experience for the participants, the intention of the providers heartfelt, but the whole experience lacked any real backup to have long lasting effect.

Much energy has been expended on Rabi in the past, encouraging people at grassroots to get small businesses with great product up and running. So many have failed because of lack of basic social support, new ideas fading like fashion because they never got fully accepted and accommodated or internalized by the village folk.

The Banaban people, for that matter all village folk in the Pacific, do not necessarily want money to be given to them. What is needed is encouragement for them to pick up one or

two of their strength areas and progress sustainable living to and at the level they can handle. Given time, they may grow with these strengths and then introduce one or two new things, exploring ways at the same time to truly internalize or integrate them, what USP Emeritus Professor Ron Crocombe calls ‘creating new traditions’.

A word of warning here too: much care has to be taken with any projects not to favour a particular village, a particular sex, a particular family clan or employment sector of society. There are many subtleties of fairness in Banaban culture, and these must always be considered. If the farmers were helped and not the fishermen for instance, or some new amenity was set up in one village for instance, the others would feel left out and in the end, resentful. Just as it would be a travesty if one primary school somehow got new resources but the other two missed out.

Any encouragement including a Skills of Enterprise program or more community development approach should ideally offer across the board opportunities to all potential aspects of Rabi development. Much care and explanation must be conveyed at a community level that the selection of individuals to spearhead any program is geared to offer spin-offs of employment opportunity and increased productivity to wider village communities.

Helping farmers and fishers is fundamental, in general encouraging their diversification and up-skilling. A succession of agricultural reports have outlined Rabi’s potential for years, basically everything can be grown in its thick rich volcanic soils except for apples and grapes! Plenty of potential new opportunities exist that could reduce farmers dependence on